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Why Weepest Thou?

JOHN HALL, D.D.

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WHY WEEPEST THOU?

OR,

The Voices of Dying Believers.

BY THE

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NEW YORK.

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ANSON D. F. RANDOLPH & COMPANY,

770 BROADWAY, COR. 9th STREET.

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THE VOICES OF DYING BELIEVERS.

A LIFE that was unique, full of romantic interest, singularly pure, and, so far as we have unquestionable evidence, nearly blameless, closed with this communication to the band of brothers: "I die: and God will surely visit you." (Gen. 50: 24.) Joseph shared the hope of his fathers; counted confidently upon Canaan being given to the race, and exacted a pledge from his brethren that his bones should accompany those who went to take possession.

The last words of eminent men have a universal interest. The last words of conspicuous saints pass from lip to lip among Christians. Who has not heard the parting words of John Wesley: "The best of all is, God is

with us." "I shall be satisfied with thy likeness — satisfied — satisfied," said his brother Charles. Jonathan Edwards said good-bye to all his children, looked about, and said, "Where is Jesus of Nazareth, my never-failing friend?" and he fell asleep and found Him. The Rev. Pliny Fisk gave a final message to his brethren, "Live near to Christ, dwell in love, and wear out in the service of Christ."

Such words may well have a peculiar charm for us, when they distil as dew from the lips of those whom we love. The writer lately had the particulars of the removal of a former parishioner and valued friend, whom he had known for twenty years—one of those often in the furnace, "purified, and made white and tried." Her cherished word from Scripture (Deut. 33 : 27) was, "The eternal God

is my refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms," and she was wont to add, "Death is only falling into his arms." It is not without reason that such words have a significance to us. Near the heavenly gates, Christians are less influenced in their judgments by lower life than when in its movements. Earth is less potent now than it was wont to be. They are also freed from the ordinary motives to speak for effect. They are honest. Many of their impressions are rectified. Death is a mighty disenchanter, not to the evil only, but also to the good. The common and transient interests of life seem trifling, almost an impertinence. The great and abiding concerns only suit the flitting and solemn movements. Men bring out the most momentous of their cares, and say, like Joseph, "I die, but God will visit you."

An analysis and arrangement of the thonghts that connect themselves with these words, (having regard to facility of recollection,) may, by the blessing of the Divine Comforter, be a means of strength to some mourner. We notice:

1. The two-fold effect of death to the saints. To begin with, it separates believers from their friends. The body remains to them; and so much are we enthralled by sense that we do not seem to ourselves to have quite parted from them while it is with us. But they go away; what made them dear to us—what lived and will ever live—what had character, and deserved esteem and won affection—that has gone forever from us below? It is the envelope, torn open, that we have; the letter is elsewhere. The body expressed, represented, served, coöperated with the

spirit, but it did not constitute the person. Between us and the real life, a great gulf is fixed, impassable to us while we are in the body. So Peter says to his friends: "I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance." (2 Peter 1 : 13.) Neither as a spirit to be communicated with by man on earth, nor as an advocate for them in Heaven, did he expect to have influence with them, or for them, after his "decease" (v. 15). So Paul says: "Having a desire to depart and be with Christ." When your beloved ones die, they leave you. You cannot reach them when they are gone, with your endearments or your services. Pay all these debts now. You cannot receive from them here any more. Get all the good you can from them now.

2. But if there be something saddening in this fact, there is, at least, a partial offset to it: for, in the second place, death reunites believers to those who have gone before them. They have compensation for the pain of parting. How soon it is swallowed up in the joy of re-union. Often they have more friends, even kindred, above than below. Often—

> "The mother meets on high,
> The babes she lost in infancy."

She has been more sure about them, than about those who remain below. More commonly and naturally, there are husbands or wives, brothers or sisters, parents, grand-parents, some who had faded into the mist of years, now beginning to stand out with wonderful vividness again. Joseph will nevermore be parted from his father, the mention of whom broke

him down. He will now for the first time know that beautiful mother who passed through the gate of death, as his brother Benjamin entered into life, and who was still the cherished bride in the memory of aged Jacob. He will know the meek-spirited Isaac, and Abraham of mighty faith, and many another great father of our race whose name lingered in his memory. The mystery of Melchizedek will be no mystery to him. This is not unworthy of our notice. There are Christian persons, particularly of social temperament and genial nature, to whom the grave has a certain aspect of awful solitude. Reason is in no doubt, but the feeling will return that somehow they will be in the grave and consciously alone; and, indeed, when we lay our beloved dead in the earth, or not less chilling, in the damps and silence of the dark

vault, perhaps to the mournful music of wintry winds, or amid driving snows, it is hard to correct habitual feeling by the sober reason, and to remember that *they* are not there, but gone to "the spirits of the just made perfect, and to God, the Judge of all." But so it is; and when an irremovable sadness comes over you in view of the separation, think of the gain—even on this low ground—to them. They are parted from you; but how dear, and noble, and numerous, is the company into which they have entered!

II. We turn, in the second place, to the two-fold assurance of a dying believer. "I die," said Joseph. That is felt to be sure, by every believer. The word had all along reminded him that this event was certain by God's appointment. Life-long ob-

servation confirmed the intimation—"the villages keep sending forth their funerals"—and every pain of body emphasized the notice. And now the sense of decaying strength, perchance the agony endured—if not this, the sensible decline of all the powers—assure the believer that the end is near.

> "The hour of my departure 's come;
> I hear the voice that calls me home;
> At last, O Lord, let trouble cease,
> And let thy servant die in peace."

So wrote Logan, but he could add:

> "I leave the world without a tear,
> Save for the friends I held so dear;
> To heal their sorrows, Lord, descend,
> And to the sorrowing prove a friend."

For there is a second assurance to a saint respecting, not himself, but the believers who remain behind: "The Lord will visit you." In

Joseph's case there was explicit promise from the Lord. Abraham and Isaac had received it. It could not be doubted. But is there not a promise in the Bible, somewhere, for all believers, in all conditions?

"I die; but God will surely visit you," a departing husband may say to the loving and trusted stay of his life, "for he is the husband of the widow. He will surely make his promise good."

"I die; but God will surely visit you," he may say to his children, for He has said, "Leave thy fatherless children: I will preserve them alive." (Jer. xlix: 11.)

"I die; but God will surely visit you," may a minister say to his people, for he has said: "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

And so in all the varying conditions of saints. Let the bereavement

be ever so keen—let the blow be ever so sudden, coming like the bolt from the serene sky—let the trouble be ever so heavy, "God is a very present help." When father and mother forsake, He takes up the orphan. A Father of the fatherless, and a Judge of the widow, is He from His holy habitation. When, as in the inimitable pathos of Psalm 142, the desolate and friendless waif, says: "I looked on the right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me; refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul"—there is an instant and sufficient alternative: "I cried unto thee, O Lord; I said, 'Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living.'" (v. 5.)

Now, what enables one to give such assurance to the living from closing, dying lips? One word answers—Faith. And what is it? Jo-

seph's case may instruct us. He merely believed what God said; not, recollect, an inference from God's general character, or a deduction from what he supposed God's attributes should be, but he held the belief of a definite word of the Lord. A promise is as necessary to faith as light to vision, or a fulcrum to the lever. And it is not only essential to the giving, it is also to the receiving, comfort. Tell an unbeliever of Jesus as the resurrection and the life—tell him of acceptance and immediate blessedness. You only give him words, that mean no more to him than the happy hunting-grounds of the savage, or the elysium of Virgil, To him, if he is sincere and logical, his nearest and dearest go out friendless, solitary, into the great darkness, they know not—he knows not—how, or whither. A funeral service is to

him only a beautiful custom, and prayer or praise—an outlet for human feeling. Where infidels are not "without natural affection," the death of their beloved ought to be to them both inexplicable and intolerable, and I do not wonder at their angry reproaches of they know not what, or the hasty conclusion to which they leap, that no benevolent being could do anything so cruel. So that you may be able to give, and when you lose your beloved ones here, that you may be able to take comfort, reader, believe. Joseph had his eye on the promise of the land. Believers, too, have their promised land, the land of peace, the land of re-union, the happy land, the land of uprightness. They are like the members of a family parting for the night, going each to his bed, and counting confidently on meeting in the morning.

III. There is a third aspect in which we may properly look at the final scenes of believers' earthly course. They have a double claim on surviving friends. They are entitled to our *continued affection.* We do not count them "the loved and lost." They do not cease to be ours; and now they are more worthy our love than ever they were before. Men sometimes deemed the Covenanters hard and stern because they made such stanch resistance to wrong. Oh, how little they know them! There was Halyburton, strong as a man, and a theologian, who early lost a little son, George. Just before his death, he said, "I am thinking on the pleasant spot that I may get to lie in, close beside Mr. Rutherford and Principal Anderson. I will come in as a little one among them, and I will get my little George in my hand, and oh! *we*

will be a group of bonnie dust." That was his way of saying how Christ keeps even the bodies of His people.

They have a right to *grateful remembrance.* The dear memorial, the unostentatious monument that does not challenge attention so much to the wealth of the living as the worth of the dead—the befitting memoir in notable cases; all these are as they ought to be. "The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance."

And we owe them *imitation.* It is the sweetest tribute. It is the most fitting homage we can bring them. We can be "baptized for the dead." They used in ancient times, when the warrior died, to lay aside his sword and shield until his eldest son, grown to man's estate, could bear them. And oh! ye children of godly parents, are ye as loyal to their memory as chivalry and honor made man-

kind? Have you put on their armor and taken their places among the Lord's sacramental host?

There is another claim the departing saint may set up. Joseph exacted a pledge from his brethren. They bound themselves in the most solemn way to bear his bones into the sacred soil. Not, we may well believe, because he thought the mouldering body would be affected thereby, but because he would show the tenacity of his own faith, and keep alive the hope among the Hebrew seed, did he exact this pledge.

And there are promises that the dying, in virtue of the lives they have lived, the prayers they have offered, the words they have spoken, the entreaties and the tears with which they sought to win—in virtue of their nearness to heaven, and the sacredness and

elevation of their place—there are promises they may claim from us. Are there none of my readers who have seen the claim set up, but who have not yet acknowledged it? Are there none of you who were charged by departing relatives to meet them in heaven? They held your hands—they looked you in the face with ineffable tenderness—they pressed the plea, and you said—you could not do otherwise—"Yes, by God's help, we will!"

Well, have you kept the charge? Have you set about redeeming the pledge? Are you on the way? Are your eyes and steps Zionward?

Only two things remain to be said. All shall die. Your friends, on whom you lean—your beloved ones, who are everything to you—your idols—shall die. Your Josephs shall

pass away. To whom will ye then look? *You* shall die. Have you the comfort of knowing your safety in Christ? Can you give comfort to others?

Believers! One stay never fails. "I die; but the Lord"—He "dieth no more." He liveth for evermore. He has the keys of hell and of death. He is a stay and support to His people. He stands by them and strengthens them. He ever lives to intercede for them. They do not die as Stephen did, nor need the vision that made him visibly triumphant, but as really as to him, though the opened heavens do not show it, He is at the right of the throne, "standing," because He is active on their behalf, because He pleads their cause, because He waits to receive and welcome them; and in Him and with Him they live for evermore.

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